



## Watching Out For An Original Texan

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

When pioneer settlers from the south and east first reached central Texas, they found a particularly appropriate creature already occupying the area. The prehistoric-looking reptile, now known as the Texas Horned Lizard, seemed to reflect the land itself—rugged, fearsome, spiny, tough—and wondrously friendly, all at the same time.

Many of us who grew up in Texas spent countless hours watching and studying “horn frogs,” or “horny toads,” with their distinctive, protective spikes and horns, as they scuttled in their brown and tan camouflage through arid territory. Being cold blooded, they love hot weather and they’ve always been part of the Texas mystique.

The Texas Legislature declared the Texas Horned Lizard—one of three lizard species found here—the official state reptile in 1993. But their fame extends even further.

William Porter, who wrote under the pen name ‘O. Henry’, popularized the Horned Lizard in a 1911 short story titled: “Jimmy Hayes and Muriel.” Hayes was a young, green Texas Ranger working the border. Muriel, a Horned Lizard, was his beloved “side partner” who traveled inside Hayes’ blue flannel shirt. Like most of O. Henry’s stories, this one has a surprise ending.

Among non-fiction Texas Horned Lizards, “Old Rip” is the most famous. It’s an article of faith in Eastland County (between Abilene and Fort Worth) that Old Rip hibernated for 31 years while trapped in the cornerstone of the county courthouse. As the story tells it, he slowly revived when he was freed in 1928, and lived another happy year as a celebrity. Old Rip can still be viewed in a locked case in the Eastland courthouse.

In 1897, four students at AddRan Christian University in Waco were asked to find a school mascot. Looking for something distinctively Texan, they narrowed the choices to the cactus and the Horned Frog. Lizards were overrunning the football field, so the nod went to the reptile.

AddRan became Texas Christian University in 1902, and the school moved back to Fort Worth a few years later. The students’ decision proved inspired. A few years ago, ESPN declared the ferocious-looking and unique Horned Frog to be the best college mascot in the country.

Athletic Horned Frogs may be thriving at TCU, but the rapid growth of Texas has created major problems for the real thing. Urbanization and

population growth have dramatically diminished their native habitat. Horned Lizards are now almost impossible to find in Waco and much of central Texas.

Their allure is their ferocious appearance, coupled with an amiable personality. Horned Lizards are three to five inches long. They appear to enjoy human company, and that’s led to misguided efforts to keep them as pets.

A more recent danger has been increased agriculture and pest control efforts, particularly those combating the onslaught of the red fire ant.

Spiders, beetles and grasshoppers are suitable, but the first food choice of a Texas Horned Lizard is an ant—specifically, the common harvester ant. As we use more pesticides to battle fire ants, however, harvester ants are dying as well. That deprives Horned Lizards of an important food source.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is moving to safeguard these valued reptiles. The Horned Lizard now enjoys protected status. That means they can’t be captured, possessed, transported or sold in Texas without a special permit.

The Department has enlisted volunteers across the state to look for Horned Lizards and monitor their well-being. Sightings east of the Hill Country are now becoming rare. To lend a hand, or learn more, visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hornytoads/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hornytoads/).

Horned Lizards look frightful, but they’re friendly, unique creatures that share our heritage and contribute to our appreciation of nature. There’s still plenty of room for them in the vast expanse of Texas. With care and attention, these original Texans will be with us forever.

*Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee’s Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee’s Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column)*